



Piecing It Together

ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES

DEALING WITH CONFLICT

When conflict gets out of hand, it can be a terrible thing. It can tear a home apart. It can wreck a friendship. It can destroy a child's trust and self-esteem. But when handled skillfully, conflict can be a positive force.

By skillfully solving conflict, we learn to understand each other better. We prevent violence. We open up to new and creative possibilities. Perhaps most important of all, by our example, we teach our children valuable lessons. Remember that each conflict is an opportunity to grow in wisdom, compassion and strength. Don't create or feed conflict. But when it comes your way, welcome conflict as a friend and teacher, and your children will gradually learn to do the same.

ESSENTIAL SKILLS

- # 1. Define expectations
- # 2. Resolve problems before they grow
- # 3. Don't tolerate inappropriate behavior

VIDEO SUMMARY: Lisa, a young single parent, is baffled about how to manage the day-to-day fights and conflicts that crop up among her children. She discusses her concerns with Ann, a more experienced single mother. Ann advises her to resolve conflicts before they grow and get out of control. The video also features interviews with single parents who give additional suggestions on how to deal with conflict.

Essential Skill # 1

DEFINE EXPECTATIONS

Think about it: Could you do a good job at work if you didn't know what was expected of you? Could a championship basketball team compete successfully if the players didn't know what their coach wanted them to do?

Of course not. And it works the same way in all areas of life, including parent-child relationships. Defining expectations in your family helps

you avoid unnecessary conflicts. Everything runs more smoothly.

Your children need to know clearly what is expected of them. "Shawn, first finish your homework. Then you can go out and play with your friends." And your children need to know what they can expect from you. "Leah, if you need to talk, I'll stop what I'm doing and give you my full attention."

Clear expectations add structure to your home and to the lives of your children. Understanding expectations, and learning to meet them, provides your children with important lessons in self-control and achievement.

Don't hold expectations that are too high for your child's age and abilities. Doing so sets your child up for failure and sets you up for frustration. Keep your expectations reasonable. Your goal is to help your child succeed.

As a single parent, one good way to define expectations for your children is to establish a few family rules:

- Set up household rules and post them on the fridge or a cabinet. That way everyone will know what the rules are. Talk about the rules with your children. As much as possible, let your children help decide what the rules will be.
- Keep the rules simple and short. And make sure each rule is important. If it's not all that important, it's best to drop it off the list.
- Set time limits with your rules. For example, Saturday chores must be done by noon. This eliminates any confusion about the rule and will cut down on arguments.
- Stay consistent, but don't be rigid. It's OK to occasionally make an exception.
- Tell your children what the consequences will be if they choose not to follow the rules. Be specific. Don't just say, "You're gonna be in big trouble." Instead, tell your children what the outcome will be. They need to know up front how their behavior will be dealt with.
- Reward positive behavior with a thank you, smile, hug, or some words of encouragement and praise.

Defining expectations can also come in handy when dealing with co-workers and other adults. In relating to a former spouse, for example, having clearly defined visitation guidelines can prevent a lot of unnecessary conflict.

Essential Skill # 2

RESOLVE PROBLEMS BEFORE THEY GROW

Sometimes a conflict isn't worth fooling with. Stay on your toes, and pay attention to your hunches and instincts. Then you'll get a sense of which problems need your immediate attention and which ones can be pretty much ignored.

Generally speaking, conflicts are like weeds in a garden. They are much easier to deal with if you catch them when they are small. Catch problems early, before they grow into monsters. Here are a few guidelines you'll find useful:

- Usually it's best to address a conflict immediately. Avoid putting off until tomorrow what can be taken care of today.
- When you're stressed out, occasionally it may be best to avoid dealing with a problem until you're calmer and more rested. Just don't put it off for too long. And don't make waiting to deal with problems a habit.
- Keep the lines of communication with your child open. When your son can freely talk to you about his fears and frustrations, he'll be able to sidestep a lot of potential problems.
- When you see trouble beginning to brew, guide your child in a more positive direction: "Juanita, let's take your ball and play catch outside."
- As a parent, set an example by dealing with problems early on, before they become bigger and harder to handle. And do so with a positive attitude, a smile and a touch of creativity.
- Assist children in finding their own solutions to little conflicts that crop up. Help them feel safe

and respected. Let them know that you have faith in their abilities. As necessary, guide children in finding peaceful solutions to their conflicts, but allow them to take as much leadership as possible.

While resolving problems before they get out of hand is important with your children, you can apply the same skill in many other areas of your life. Whether the conflict arises at work, among friends or with an in-law, there are some basic points to keep in mind.

Remember that differences of opinion are normal. Try to see conflict as an opportunity for learning and growing, and look for a solution both people can live with. Instead of attacking, calmly ask questions with an open mind. Avoid blaming and stay focused on one issue at a time.

Perhaps most important of all, when it feels right, be big enough to say, "I'm sorry" or, "I like your idea." Often it's more important to be loving than to be right.

Brainstorming. Sometimes a quick brainstorming session can head off conflict before it becomes a major problem. You can brainstorm as a family, as an individual, or with a friend or group. Here's how it's done.

Pinpoint your challenge. What problem are you trying to solve? State your challenge as a question. Be specific. With the question in front of you, jot down or share every answer or thought that pops into your mind. Don't criticize any ideas. Stay open-minded and positive.

Creative, wild thinking is wonderful! Build upon ideas already suggested. The more ideas, the better. Say whatever comes to mind. Be playful. Have fun! Finally, look at all the possibilities that

came up. Pick out one of the best solutions and give it a try. Think twice before discarding unusual ideas. Creativity is the spice of life and can open up new and interesting possibilities.

Essential Skill # 3

DON'T TOLERATE INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR

You have the natural responsibility to enforce the rules in your home. As a single parent, you are in charge. You need to know this and so do your children. It gives your children a sense of security, and it gives you an important measure of loving control.

Nobody enjoys a spoiled child, especially one who is always throwing temper tantrums. Be sure to deal with this kind of behavior when it happens. Don't allow the child's behavior to take over your family. You are the parent and need to control what happens in your home and family.

Learn to discipline, not to punish. Punishment corrects a specific act of misbehavior. Discipline, on the other hand, is a way of teaching that molds your child's future behavior. Try to make the result of unacceptable behavior something that will help your child learn the way you would like him to behave.

For example, if your son pulled the chair out from under a friend, punishment might be to send him to his room. To discipline your son, you might require him to open the door pleasantly for every person entering your apartment building or the supermarket for an hour.

Have you ever seen a parent yell at their children, "Stop screaming at each other!" Well, we've all probably done some version of that. It sends a mixed and confusing message to our children. If we're going to be successful in reducing inappropriate behavior, we have to practice what we preach. Keep these guidelines in mind:

- One of the best ways to discourage unacceptable behavior is for you to model the kind of behavior you want to see in your children.
- Enforce the rules you have set up. If your children helped make up the rules and have agreed to abide by them, remind them of this.
- Follow through with what you say you are going to do, and be consistent. If there are no consequences for breaking the rules, why have rules? When you don't follow through consistently, you teach your child that following important rules is unnecessary.
- Allow older children to play a major role in setting their own rules and in deciding consequences if the rules are not followed.
- It's not too early to start teaching proper behavior. Even babies as young as ten or twelve months can learn where they are not to crawl.
- It's not too late to start teaching appropriate behavior, either—although it may be a lot tougher once a child is five or fifteen.
- In correcting your child, you don't need to use a lot of words. Simply make your point in a firm voice: "In our home we don't hit each other and we don't use mean words."

When your child's behavior is really out of line, try not to blow up or get angry. You will be much more powerful and effective as a parent if you remain calm and in touch with your inner strength.

In some cases, children cause conflicts because of deeper problems. Be aware of such things as a marked drop in school grades, withdrawal from friends and social contact, hanging around with quite different friends, being cruel to animals, or extreme changes in mood. Behaviors like these could be signs of a bigger problem.

If you suspect your child's behavior is not quite normal, don't be afraid to turn to a professional counselor. Your phone book lists several different sources for help. There is nothing to be ashamed about in reaching out for help. Just don't wait until it's too late to get the help your child needs.

While it's important that we don't slip into the habit of allowing misbehavior, we also need to know when to occasionally loosen up or look the other direction. Dr. Charles Smith, a family relations specialist from Kansas State University, offers the following illustration.

A brother (6 years old) and a sister (5 years old) have argued a lot recently. One evening their mother hears them laughing and jumping on their beds. The children know they are not supposed to do that. However, Mom chooses to not respond. At this particular time, she knows that letting them enjoy each other's company is more important.

Define expectations. Resolve problems before they grow. And don't tolerate inappropriate behavior. Practicing these skills will help things go smoother in every area of your life.

All families have conflicts. Conflict is like sandpaper. It rubs off our rough edges, so that we can handle the challenges of life more smoothly and capably. Conflict helps us see when important changes are needed in our attitudes and home routines. Through conflict we grow in sensitivity, strength and wisdom.



Prepared by project team members, this publication is one part of the 10-part "Essential Skills for Single Parent Families" series. Funded by Community Connections for Children—Bluegrass Area Development District.

Although this publication is copyrighted, you are free to reproduce it in its entirety for non-profit, educational purposes. Copyright © 1999 University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, Assistant Director for Home Economics Extension, 206 Scovell Hall, Lexington, KY 40546-0064. *Educational programs of the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service serve all people regardless of race, color, age, sex, religion, disability, or national origin.*



NOTES:

Personal Action Plan

Think about Dealing with Conflict and the three target skills: *Define Expectations*, *Resolve Problems Before They Grow*, and *Don't Tolerate Inappropriate Behavior*. Now zero in on one of these areas and choose one small but important change you really want to make in the next few days. Visualize yourself successfully following through. Tell a supportive friend or family member about your goal. **Write your action plan in the space below.**

Beginning Date _____

Signature _____